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The Bhopal hospital has created a SAI ward to admit infected athletes

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2 JUDOKAS TEST COVID +VE, TEAM OUT OF OLY QUALIFIER

Entire 19-member judo contingent for Asia-Oceania meet in Bishkek has been quarantined. Other sports too not spared

UNCERTAIN DAYS AHEAD FOR SQUAD

A day after one judoka contracted Covid-19, a second athlete also returned a positive test on Wednesday. As a result, all members are in isolation. The Judo Federation of India (JFI) have dialled Indian Embassy, seeking their help in flying those who tested negative back to India. Since they were not allowed to compete, India decided to pull out of the competition | P17

SAI BHOPAL INUNDATED WITH CASES

- As many as 36 people, including 24 athletes at SAI's Bhopal facility, test positive across two rounds of testing. Interestingly, few of the judokas in Bishkek were training in Bhopal
- In the IPL, RCB's Daniel Sams tested positive. ISL side Bengaluru FC also reported three positive Covid-19 tests

1 week

NEW SAI SOP SAYS NATIONAL CAMPERS TO BE TESTED ONCE EVERY WEEK

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • WARANGAL • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

Now, sparring over vax politicisation

Maharashtra, Andhra send SOS for more stock; Centre says some states are trying to mislead and spread panic

SANA SHAKIL @ New Delhi

THE Centre and the Opposition-ruled states clashed over vaccine availability on Wednesday when India recorded a day's high of 1,15,736 fresh cases, crossing the 1-lakh mark for the second time in three days.

The Union Health Ministry came down hard on Opposition-ruled states for playing "petty politics" over vaccination and stated that there is no dearth of vaccine stock, hours after Maharashtra, Delhi, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh said that they have sent SOS alerts to the Centre over Covid vaccine scarcity.

"The lackadaisical attitude of the state government has singularly bogged down the entire country's efforts to fight the virus," Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said, referring to the Thackeray-led Maharashtra government.

He also criticised the Congress-led government in Chhattisgarh for being 'perhaps the only government in the world where its leaders were inciting vaccine hesitancy' and blamed its leaders for spreading "misinformation" and "panic" regarding vaccination.

Vardhan blamed states for their alleged attempts to distract attention from their failure to manage the Covid-19 pandemic and described the allegations of vaccine shortage as "baseless". Referring to Delhi, Maharashtra and Rajasthan governments' demand to open vaccination for all adults, Vardhan said that the Centre has been transparently updating all the state governments about the demand-supply dynamics and the resultant jab strategy.

In his letter, Harsh Vardhan also pointed to the lack of Covid-19 facilities in Rajasthan, Punjab as well as BJP-ruled Karnataka and Gujarat. "Many other states also need to bring their healthcare systems up to the mark. For example, the quality of testing needs to improve in Karnataka, Rajasthan and Gujarat. In Punjab, high case fatality rate needs to be improved by early identification of those needing hospitalisation," he said.

Vardhan said irresponsible statements by some state functionaries were spreading panic among the people.

GET THE SHOT IN YOUR OFFICE

- Govt and private offices eligible
- Should have about 100 eligible and willing employee beneficiaries
- In districts, task force chaired by District Magistrate to identify workplace
- In cities, task force headed by Municipal Commissioner to identify workplace
- Beneficiary has to be 45+; registration on Co-WIN mandatory
- Workplace management to designate senior staff as nodal officer to coordinate with authorities | P10

The bodies of eight Covid-19 victims placed on a single pyre due to shortage of space at a makeshift crematorium in Maharashtra's Beed district on Tuesday | PTI

Bengaluru to be in focus as BSY interacts with PM today

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

WITH 4,991 fresh Covid-19 cases reported on Wednesday alone, Bengaluru will be the focal point of discussion for Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa on Thursday when he participates in a video conference with Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with chief ministers of other states.

Bengaluru is among the top 10 cities contributing to the surge in Covid-19 cases in the country as the second wave of infections have returned stronger. With the Union Government allowing vaccination centres to be set up at work places as well, Karnataka is expected to push for a more steady supply of vaccines to ensure that shortage does hamper the vaccination drive.

As on Wednesday, the state had completed inoculating 3,50,404 health care workers, 94,748 front line workers, 10,227 citizens in the 45-59 age group and 37,278 citizens aged over 60 with the second dose of the vaccines.

CONTINUED ON: P4

KARNATAKA SECOND WAVE BATTLE

6,976 State sees the biggest daily spike so far

35 Deaths reported during the day

1,25,390 Samples tested on Wednesday

48,32,382 TOTAL VACCINATIONS ACHIEVED SO FAR

Bengaluru Urban reported 4,991 cases during the day, followed by 243 cases in Mysuru and 214 cases in Bidar

With the cases rapidly rising, government quota beds at hospitals are running out fast

Dovish RBI opts for pause on rates, flags inflation risk

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

THE Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday kept interest rates unchanged to support growth but remained cautious amid risks to the economy arising from the second wave of Covid infections and high inflation.

Announcing the decision to keep the policy rate at 4%, RBI governor Shaktikanta Das said the central bank will do "whatever it takes" to support economic recovery.

The RBI also retained its FY22 GDP growth forecast of 10.5% with the warning that re-imposition of lockdown in some states could hurt the economy.

"The recent surge in infections has imparted greater uncertainty to the outlook," Das said. "Localised and regional lockdowns could dampen the recent improvement in demand conditions and delay the return of normalcy," he added.

Inflation remained a concern, as RBI raised its inflation forecast for Q2 and Q3 by 0.2% and 0.1% to 5.2% and 4.4%, respectively. With this, RBI is projecting inflation at 5% in FY22.

The RBI also committed to buy government bonds worth ₹1 lakh crore under 'the secondary market government securities acquisition programme' or G-Sap.

While the RBI stance was on expected lines, experts say the focus was on supporting growth. "The RBI policy was more dovish than expected with the central bank recognising the risks associated with the rising infection cases in the county and continuing its support for growth. Fears of any premature tightening either through rates or liquidity management by some sections of the market have been put to rest by RBI's dovish tone," said Abheek Barua, chief economist, HDFC Bank.

In another development, RBI has proposed to allow cash withdrawals from digital wallets such as Paytm and prepaid cards issued by non-bank entities. P15

Private buses and autorickshaws pick up commuters from inside Majestic bus stand during the transport employees' strike on Wednesday | VINOD KUMAR T

Bus services hit, govt warns of tough measures

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

BUS services were affected in many parts of the state as drivers and conductors of the four road transport corporations began their indefinite strike over wage-related issues on Wednesday. Passengers travelling to and from distant areas and office-goers were the most affected.

Hundreds of commuters were left stranded at bus stations across the city, with BMTC buses staying off the roads. While some waited long hours at bus stations for privates buses, others looked for alternative arrangements. Some even opted to work from home or postpone their travel. Many made a beeline to Namma Metro stations to reach their destinations even as bus stations and terminals wore a deserted look.

To ensure that commuters do not suffer further, the State Government is planning to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa declared in Belagavi on Wednesday. P4

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in West Bengal? Maybe in Naxalbari

Ear to the Ground WEST BENGAL

SANTWANA BHATTACHARYA

THE game is going into the bloody slog overs in Bengal, but where is Rahul Gandhi? Call it a secondary mystery wrapped inside a nail-biting political thriller. It's a missing piece of jigsaw no one seems to have much noticed—or considered—despite it having the potential to decide a cliffhanger.

Now, it's quite natural that when it comes to Bengal—the mother, or perhaps the big sister of all battles—attention has tended to be concentrated upon the primary antagonists. Like a convex lens focusing sunlight, the pitched battle of attrition between the Trinamool and the BJP has been setting off a lot of fires in the media.

Who has time, then, to think about the Congress—a dwindling presence here, atrophying even in its old pockets of influence? If at all it gets talked about, it's because of the curious alliance it has helped put together, the Sanjukta Morcha, which has it partnering with the Left and a party floated by an Islamic cleric.

The Morcha is in play in 294 seats, but it may be tough going for them. The Congress is fighting some 92 of those, but even by its own internal estimations, the party stands a good chance of halving its tally in the state Assembly from 44 to 22. Others say even that's optimistic, and reckon the Morcha's overall pickings would be between 25 and 60 when play ends.

But 92 seats are not piffling stakes, so the question remains: Where is Rahul? Or Priyanka Gandhi, for that matter? Even the other usual national faces of the Congress have all been conspicuous by their absence. What's up?

The standard reading is Bengal offers such a dismal picture that they are giving it a wide berth, and focused on Assam and Kerala, where they are truly in the game.

But there's also a sense that the Congress central command is uncomfortable campaigning against Mamata Banerjee. Many of the party's UPA allies—the NCP, RJD and DMK—are outright supporting Mamata as the lone woman soldier holding out against a rampaging BJP. Even the Samajwadi Party, though not in the UPA, sent Jaya Bachchan to the battlefield—she held a press meet backing Mamata, and letting on that her party leader Akhilesh Yadav had clearly taken the West Bengal CM as a valuable anti-BJP force.

CONTINUED ON: P9

EXPRESS READ

Former Mumbai police chief appears before NIA

Mumbai: Former Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh appeared before the NIA on Wednesday with regard to the case of an explosives-laden SUV found near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's residence.

Picture of abducted jawan surfaces on social media

Bijapur: A photograph of Rakeshwar Singh Manhas sitting in a hut has been purportedly released by Naxals who abducted the CoBRA commando after the fierce gun battle in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh on April 3. P9

GST is not citizen-friendly: Apex court

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

GOODS and Services Tax (GST) is not at all citizen-friendly, according to the Supreme Court. The observation came when a bench headed by Justice D Y Chandrachud was hearing a plea against the government's powers of provisional attachment under the Himachal Pradesh GST Act.

While reserving the order, the bench criticised the manner in which the indirect tax law was being enforced by authorities saying taxmen can't assume that all businesses are fraudulent.

"Parliament had aimed to give the GST a citizen-friendly tax structure. But, the purpose of the Act is lost by the manner of enforcement in our country," it said on Tuesday.

The plea was filed by Radha Krishna Industries, alleging attachment of property under Section 83 of the Act is 'draconian'.

TOUGH TIMES

For Devikunte farmers, the grass is green on the other side

When outsiders come to graze their cattle, the locals will obviously resist. But we request them and use the grazing grounds there

A Devikunte resident

A farmer from Devikunte village taking his cattle out to graze, towards Karnataka's border with Andhra Pradesh | EXPRESS

ASHWINI M SRIPAD @ Bengaluru

FOR farmers of Devikunte in Chikkaballapur district, it's an arduous trek every day across the border into Andhra Pradesh in search of green patches for the cattle ever since a forest fire burnt the pastures near their village. That's just one part of their problem. After crossing over, they are faced with resistance from locals there.

Devikunte is among the remote villages of Bagepalli taluk on the Karnataka-Andhra border. Cattle from not just here, but also surrounding villages like Picchavaara, Jillalapalli, Honnampalli and Madapalli were usually brought to the grazing ground. P7

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